VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Women's long struggle to free themselves from gender violence has been infused with greater urgency than ever before by the tragedy taking place in the former Yugoslavia, where tens of thousands of women and girls have been systematically raped and tortured. A United Nations mission to the former Yugoslavia in January 1993 found that rape had been used as an instrument of "ethnic cleansing", intended to humiliate, shame, degrade and terrify an entire population. These atrocities have been condemned by the United Nations Security Council as "unspeakable acts of brutality", and the Organization is expected to designate them as war crimes.

"There is nothing unprecedented about mass rape in war," writes Susan Brownmiller in *Newsweek*. However, she goes on to say, the plight of raped women as casualties of war is heeded by the international community only when the rapes have "propaganda value". And when the war is over, the stories of rape "are glossed over, discounted as exaggeration, deemed not serious enough for inclusion" in history books. "And the women are left with their shame".

A combination of factors has made the violence against Balkan women more visible and less likely to be forgotten than in any previous armed conflict: in particular, the presence and extensive reportage by women's groups, journalists, international observers and peace-keepers has meant that the violence has been publicly documented. Survivors, witnesses and investigators have described girls and women being stripped, battered and repeatedly raped, sometimes in public. As a result, the media in most countries have carried descriptions of the victims' ordeals in graphic detail.

The stories of these horrors have galvanized international opinion. One response has been a renewed world-wide effort to have violence against women understood as a violation of fundamental human rights. Generally overlooked until now, this approach is gaining critical support. Individually and collectively, men and women are coming to see that the United Nations ideals of peace, well-being and equality can be fulfilled only if they apply to all of humanity, not just to the masculine half.

Dorothy Thomas, Director of the Women's Rights Project of Human Rights Watch, says that in conflict situations all over the world it is clear that violence against women, be it rape, murder or other forms of assault, "often functions in this very significant political way, furthering the objectives of either side". Even in peace, she observes, rape also serves political objectives at times.

"It's used in detention situations, it's used in other forms of military occupation, and even in the instances where it's used in the home, you can see it has certain similar characteristics of power, of creating and enforcing the subordinate status of women," she says. She stresses how important it is for the international community to recognize that rape is used to serve political ends, "usually with impunity".

According to researchers, sexual abuse by armies mirrors the everyday violence confronting women in times of peace. That objectification of enemy women, they argue, parallels the attitude of the anonymous rapist in a city alley, the harassing boss or the husband who believes it is his right to have sex with his wife regardless of her wishes.

Family violence is often accepted by the communities in which it occurs, overlooked by the authorities or even condoned on grounds of "honour", tradition or religion. The Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University in the United States and the World Health Organization cite the following examples of violence committed by family members:

- In the United States more women are injured in domestic violence than by car accidents, rapes and muggings put together;
- In India eight out of 10 wives are victims of violence;

► In Barbados female children are four times more likely to die from malnutrition and neglect before age 4 than boys;

► In South Africa one woman in every six is assaulted regularly by her mate;

► In San José, Costa Rica, 49 per cent of women report being beaten during pregnancy;

► In Matlab Thana, Bangladesh, 6 per cent of mothers murdered were attacked because of dowry disputes or the stigma of an unwanted pregnancy.

Violence undermines both family life and economic development. Faced with the threat of repeated onslaughts, regardless of their attempts to keep the peace, battered women may take on what Lenore E. Walker, an expert on domestic abuse, terms "learned helplessness". They are many times more likely than other women to require psychiatric help, or to resort to alcohol or drug abuse. It has also been shown repeatedly that children exposed to violence at home are more likely to use it themselves as adults.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

One United Nations human rights treaty directly addresses the rights of women: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Although the other United Nations human rights treaties explicitly embody equal protection for women, the monitoring of those treaties has tended to overlook female experiences and needs. Dorothy Thomas of Human Rights Watch believes that those traditionally in a position to determine what constitutes a human rights abuse have tended to view women's issues as marginal, as private matters happening in the home. But "I think that attitude is changing," she says.

A new partnership is developing between the major human rights organizations and women's rights activists. According to Ms. Thomas, the latter have long been trying to get the human rights community to pay attention to the fact that women are being subjected to torture and to cruel and inhuman punishment and discrimination.

"They were finding that their colleagues in the human rights organizations—both in their own countries and internationally—were really not that interested, that in fact they often turned a blind eye and deaf ear to the real calls for assistance," she recounts.

Activists in more than 100 countries mounted campaigns to have women's rights included on the agenda of the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna, 14-25 June 1993. A petition initiated by the Center for Global Women's Leadership at Rutgers University attracted almost 500,000 signatures from women of all nationalities, some affluent, some poor, some academically distinguished, some able to sign with only a thumb print or cross.

Central to that concern has been the issue of violence, described as the "ultimate form of discrimination" by Chafika Meslem, former Director of the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women. "The existence of violence against women, either as an act or as a threat, constitutes an essential means by which discrimination is maintained," she says.

Statistics from around the globe show how pervasive gender-based violence is. From female infanticide to starvation of girl children, forced prostitution, incest, dowry killings, genital mutilation and routine domestic bludgeoning, it thrives in all regions of the world.

The sense of urgency about the plight of women has been voiced in developed and developing countries alike. Calls for action have risen from rural collectives, urban coalitions, educational and media groups, national and regional bodies. At the United Nations, in Latin America and in Europe, conventions on violence against women are now in the process of being drafted.

These moves offer hope for coordination and information exchange in areas such as legislative change and special training for law-enforcement personnel, as well as:

► Emergency accommodation plans for women and children facing danger at home;

► Economic measures to boost women's financial independence; and

► General education to make child-rearing a shared responsibility shouldered by the whole society, rather than a burden resting only on women.

UNITED NATIONS ACTION

Within the past year, the United Nations' two primary bodies concerned with women's issues, the Commission on the Status of Women and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), have both focused on the issue of violence.

In March 1993 the Commission approved a draft declaration on the elimination of violence against women which would have States exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and punish acts of violence against women, whether those acts are perpetrated by individuals or by the State. States would also be called upon to develop preventive measures of a legal, political, administrative and cultural nature that would promote the protection of women against any form of violence. The text defines violence against women to mean "any act of gender-based violence", including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether they occur in public or private. The declaration is expected to be adopted by the General Assembly in 1993.

While the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women contains no article explicitly dealing with violence, the Committee, which monitors compliance with the Convention, in a new recommendation on the subject, has called on States parties to report on violence and on measures introduced to deal with it.

However, neither the declaration nor the Convention contains procedures for enforcement or complaints. Although these instruments focusing specifically on women's well-being have demonstrable value, their lack of "teeth" underlines the need also to ensure that other international human rights treaties are used to protect women.

A "FASHIONABLE" ISSUE?

The new awareness of women's human rights could ebb again, as it has in the past. Jane Connors, an expert on family law and a consultant for the United Nations during the drafting of the declaration on violence against women, points out that violence against women was a "fashionable" issue in the early 1980s and then faded as other matters took precedence.

Women have often had their own concerns subordinated to issues which men regard as more crucial. In many countries where women have fought alongside men in wars or struggles for national independence, they have later found themselves sidelined. Such ongoing concerns as domestic violence and marital rights are frequently ignored by legislators in favour of measures to maintain national security or cut the deficit.

The most potent force for liberation, however, is women's changing views of themselves, their cultures, religions and social mores:

If the pregnant woman in India whose sonogram shows her foetus to be female believes that that child is inherently as valuable as a male, she may be less inclined to abort it purely on the grounds of its sex.

In Bolivia an Office of Battered Women is offering innovative support for women willing to call a halt to their suffering. But as a social worker told *The New York Times*, "The husband is a combination of king and loafer. So you can have a husband beating his wife and someone tries to intervene and the wife begins to protect her husband saying it is his right to do it."

The same phenomenon colours action in the United Kingdom and the United States. Police in both countries say they hesitate to arrest men accused of domestic violence because their wives so often refuse to press assault charges. Their reasons might be loving and practical, but they undermine efforts to end violence and perpetuate the idea that their well-being is less important than their husbands'.

In many societies that practise genital mutilation of females, it is frequently the women who do the clitoral cutting and stitching of the labia. While women activists in Africa and the Middle East are campaigning to end the practice, many women have defended it, despite the dangerous infection and lifelong pain it can cause.

CHANGING VIEWS

But values are shifting in many areas.

- A Somali woman living in the Western world said she would not have her daughters circumcised—not in response to Western criticism, but because she had

discovered that it was merely a traditional custom, not a ruling of Islam.

► In the United States, a domestic violence programme that makes arrest of the alleged attacker compulsory has become a model for law-enforcement groups around the country.

► Some police stations in Brazil have been staffed with women in order to ensure more understanding treatment of female crime victims.

One of the most basic changes is in women's attitudes to their own physical selves—their strength, fitness and ability to defend themselves. Threatened with violence in so many areas of their lives, more and more women have been learning self-defence techniques and how to handle weapons. For many, that leads to independence and an awareness of their own power, including the ability to confront men without physical fear.

However, one possible consequence is that women are increasingly being charged with violent crimes. And the proliferation of guns means that physical size is not necessarily a factor.

The need to develop alternative methods of conflict resolution thus becomes all the more urgent. Education in verbal mediation for both girls and boys is being introduced in different parts of the world from the first year of schooling.

Women and men supportive of egalitarian goals are making their views heard in more and more areas, demanding representation and exploring ways to champion their rights both locally and internationally. Through their efforts, the "life, liberty and security of person" and freedom from "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" promised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights might one day be enjoyed universally.

Published by the United Nations Department of Public Information
Printed by the United Nations Reproduction Section, New York
DPI/1332—July 1993—5M